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Diane M. Stuart, director of the U.S. Department of Justice Office on Violence Against Women, right, speaks at the grand opening program for the Sitka Family Justice Center at the Sheet'ka Kwaan Naa Kahidi

today. Pictured seated are, from left, U.S. Sen. Lisa Murkowski; Alaska Rep. Peggy Wilson; George Ridley, Sitka Tribe of Alaska vice-chairman; and Alaska Sen. Bert Stedman, R-Sitka. (Sentinel Photo)

Family Justice Center Officially Opened

By ANDREW MILLER
Sentinel Staff Writer

U.S. Sen. Lisa Murkowski and Diane Stuart, director of the Federal Office on Violence Against Women, addressed a gathering of about 150 Sitkans today at the grand opening celebration for the Sitka Family Justice Center.

The ceremony was held at the Sheet'ka Kwaan Naa Kahidi.

Stuart, who came from Washington, D.C., for the ceremony, read a letter from President Bush recognizing Sitka as one of only 15 such centers in the country. Stuart also presented a plaque in honor of those who serve the victims of domestic violence.

Today's events began with a ribbon cutting at the Family Justice Center on Katlian Street. The dedication cere-

mony and salmon lunch followed at the Sheet'ka Kwaan Naa Kahidi. Among those who spoke at the dedication were state Sen. Bert Stedman, state Rep. Peggy Wilson, Sitka Tribe of Alaska council vice chairman George Ridley and Assembly member Doris Bailey.

The center has been designed as a one-stop-shop for victims of domestic violence and sexual assault. Clients will receive help as needed from the police, health organizations, the tribal court, domestic violence advocates, a lawyer, a family psychologist, and drug and alcohol counselors.

The center is funded by a \$1.15 million federal grant, created as part of a 2003 initiative by President Bush through the U.S. Department of Justice to fight domestic violence.

STA has collaborated with many local agencies, including Sitkans Against Family Violence, the Alaska Network on Domestic Violence, Sitka Counseling and Prevention Service and the City and Borough Police Department.

Sitka's is the only family justice center in Alaska, and STA is the only tribal entity to be awarded a grant. Sitka also is by far the smallest community in the country to have a family justice center.

Stuart said Sitka's center is small compared to others in the country. It may not deal with the most dramatic cases in the country, but it is a "center of peace and is a center where those that are in chaos can come to find the services they need."

She commended those who have worked on the center and said she was impressed by what has been done in Sitka. Stuart noted that her office received more than 400 letters of intent from around the country requesting information about the grant for the justice center, and 160 applications

were eventually submitted, with Sitka's rising to the top.

"You will be a model and a pattern for others to follow," she said. "People will see how things worked here."

Murkowski said Sitka should be honored to have Stuart in town, and explained that some people may not recognize what a big deal it is that Sitka was chosen as a family justice center site. She said she knows that

Center . . .

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with a population of 8.6 million, has about as many reports of child abuse each year as Alaska, with just over 600,000 people.

"I often wonder how in a state like ours where we are surrounded by such natural beauty, we can have so much ugliness," Murkowski said.

She noted that the state shouldn't focus on statistics, but rather on the individual victims. And she said Sitka needs to stand up as a place where the issue of domestic violence is being addressed.

In his comments, Stedman said that Sitka's small size makes domestic violence an issue that ripples through the entire community. He said it was good to see so many entities from the community come together and address the problem.

He said Stuart's plaque presentation is an historic event for Sitka, and that people can look at it 50 years from now and remember the steps that were taken today to fight domestic violence.

Wilson said the community should be proud to have been chosen for the center, and she urged those who work there to keep accurate statistics of its accomplishments, because the Legislature relies on figures when it makes decisions about funding.

"We're going to be watching, the whole world's going to be watching," she said. "... There is not a doubt in my mind you're going to be doing wonderful things."

Ridley said he was proud of the STA staff for its work and said that al-

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the hard work of the people in Sitka was one reason the community was chosen for the center, but domestic violence statistics also surely stuck out to those who awarded the grants.

Murkowski said she is troubled that Alaska, by a percentage of population, has twice the national average of rapes and six times as many incidents of child abuse. She said New Jersey,

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though the Sitka Family Justice Center is small by national standards the only place it can go is up.

"Break the cycle," he said.

Bailey was the final honored guest to speak, saying that she has "great optimism" about the project.

"This really is a big deal," she said.

STA tribal council member Wilbur Brown, who is also the chairman of the center steering committee, was the master of ceremonies at the celebration. He cited a long list of community members who deserve credit for work on the project.

Alaska Native Sisterhood President Isabella Brady gave an opening welcome and prayer, and Libby Watanabe gave an official welcome on behalf of the ANS.

The celebration also included a poem by Frank Ockert, a dance performance by the Naa Kahidi dancers and tours of the justice center at 429 Katlian St.



RIBBON CUTTING - Diane M. Stuart, director of the U.S. Department of Justice Office on Violence Against Women, cuts the ribbon at the new Family Justice Center this morning with the help of George Ridley, Sitka Tribe of Alaska vice-chairman, left, and Sitka Assembly member John Sherrod. (Sentinel Photo by James Poulson)